



# TEXAS LEGISLATIVE STUDY GROUP

*An Official Caucus of the Texas House of Representatives*

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## **NOW THE REAL WORK BEGINS**

The Governor's State of the State speech outlined his priorities for the 86th Legislative Session and set the stage for the real work we must complete before the Legislature adjourns on May 27th. Many of the issues that Governor Abbott mentioned have been priorities session after session because they impact Texans from all walks of life in every community across the state. The challenge before us is finding real solutions that last longer than a campaign or news cycle. We must find long term solutions that provide every Texan and their families the opportunity to achieve, succeed, and truly make our state the place that we talk about in speeches.

For the next four months, the Legislative Study Group (LSG) staff will attend every single committee hearing, meet with your staff, and consult with experts as we analyze every bill that comes to the House floor. Our mission is to provide members and staff with analysis before they take the votes on the House floor that will determine the success and failure of legislation. We will also provide special reports on major issues as the session progresses. With that in mind, here's a quick review of some of the major issues the Governor outlined in his speech this week.

### **The State of the State: The Governor's Priorities**

Governor Abbott identified six major issues as emergency items that the Legislature could act on immediately. Although there is a broad bipartisan consensus that these are issues that must be addressed, finding consensus on actual policy solutions has proven to be difficult in the past.

#### **Property Tax Relief**

This is the most specific proposal Governor Abbott offered, an annual 2.5% cap on property tax revenue generated by cities, counties, and school districts. Any greater property tax increase would require voter approval and cities and counties that generate less than \$15 million in annual property tax revenue would be exempt.

Under current law, the revenue cap for cities and counties is 8% and school districts are not covered because their tax limitations and election procedures are covered by separate statutory provisions. Supporters say this plan is necessary to slow property tax increases, although this proposal does not actually "cut" or "lower" property taxes.

Opponents have raised concerns about restricting local governments' ability to support first responders and public safety, transportation needs, and public health. In addition, because most property taxes go to local schools, they argue that cutting property taxes will require increasing the state's share of education funding from its paltry 38% state share.

#### **School Finance "Reform"**

Again, there is broad consensus that our public school finance system is broken, but compared to Governor Abbott's specific property tax proposal, he offered little in the way of details. The emphasis is on "reform" instead of "funding," and funding matters.



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Per the National Education Association (NEA), Texas spends \$2,300 less per student than the national average. "Reform" has been a code word for privatization and things like "performance-based funding" that provides additional funds to schools that do best on standardized test scores -- a concept that gives less money to the schools that need it and more to those that don't.

Polling also indicates that 78% of Texans oppose tying school funding to standardized test scores. The bottom line is simple: the state needs to spend more on our children's classrooms and take the burden off property taxpayers. The devil is in the details, but absent additional funds for our locally accountable public schools, issues like recapture will not be resolved in a way that benefits our students.

## **Teacher Pay**

The Governor cites the Dallas ISD merit/incentive pay plan as a model, but that plan would take ten years to provide every teacher even an opportunity for a merit pay raise, based to a great degree on standardized test scores. Half of our new teachers leave the profession within five years, and two major reasons are low pay and benefits, and teaching to the test. Per the NEA, 2017 average teacher pay in Texas is almost \$7,000 below the national average. In other words, Texas teachers would need roughly a 12 percent raise to meet the national average in salary. In order to attract and retain the best teachers, raising base pay for all teachers has been proposed as well.

Salaries aren't the only component to consider when looking at how Texas teachers compare nationwide. When it comes to healthcare benefits, advocates say Texas teachers are stuck in 2002. That's when state lawmakers created the plan known as TRS-ActiveCare. Texas is dead last in teacher retirement funding and puts a little more than the minimum into the Teacher Retirement System.

As retirees' costs rise, especially for medical care, there will be pressure on the Legislature to find a way to increase not only salary for current teachers, but also benefits for retired teachers.

## **School Safety**

The Governor proposed a modest set of ways to improve school safety, including mental health counselors and support for campus security.

The Legislature has made great strides on this front, especially with the creation and expansion of Mental Health First Aid Training to all school personnel. In 2013, Rep. Coleman and former Senator Bob Deuell (R-Edgewood) passed SB 460 which made several approved forms of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Training for teachers mandatory so that all teachers will be trained to recognize early warning signs of bullying, substance abuse, and mental illness. Without this type of legislation, it is likely that many teachers and school personnel would not receive this vital training.

If Governor Abbott is serious about addressing school safety in schools, collaboration with members that have worked tirelessly to expand these mental health trainings in schools is crucial. The Legislature certainly looks forward to working with the Governor this session on improving mental and behavioral health and keeping our schools safe.

However, absent in Governor Abbott's address was any mention related to gun safety legislation to tackle the gun violence epidemic.

## **Mental Health**

This is another area in which Democrats and Republicans have worked to develop bipartisan proposals; a solution for which will require additional funding.

According to allies at National Association of Mental Illness (NAMI), 1 in 5 Americans is affected by a mental health condition. Most people with mental health conditions can live full and productive lives with proper treatment. Regrettably, in Texas and across the United States, there is a lack of access to mental healthcare.



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Because of this, diversion to treatment in the criminal justice system must be a main focus of helping turn around the lives of those who are forced to live on the streets.

Continuing to fund Healthy Community Collaboratives and jail diversion programs is a key component to this goal. Rep. Coleman started the legislative action on Healthy Community Collaboratives back in 2009 and helped get \$92.5 million in matching grants set aside in the budget last session to expand these programs across the state.

This is a great start, but there are still many areas of the state that people have no place in which to be diverted. Additionally, if all the areas currently receiving funding do not continue to have their funding renewed, all their progress will come to a halt. This current session, legislators will need to ensure funding is kept in the budget and increased so that all Texans can get quality care, regardless of their zip code.

## **Disaster Response**

The impact of natural disasters grows more devastating every year. In the wake of the unprecedented damage caused by Hurricane Harvey, which was compounded by the slow and uncertain response from the federal government, the Governor recognized the need to use the Economic Stabilization Fund for disaster relief. Long term planning to mitigate harm from disastrous events should also be on the table.

## **What Wasn't Mentioned**

### **Healthcare**

At a time when the Texas Attorney General is trying to scuttle the Affordable Care Act, fewer Texans have healthcare than they did just a year ago. Although some states with Republican Governors have worked in a bipartisan manner to expand Medicaid, Texas is allowing our federal tax dollars to be used to provide healthcare for people in other states. Those residents in other states are benefiting from the health and the economic benefits realized when more people have healthcare coverage.

### **Election Security and Participation**

The U.S. Intelligence Community has confirmed that a foreign government is actively working to impact our elections. The state has a responsibility to secure voting systems that provide every Texan the opportunity to cast a vote that counts.

Instead, the state has released an error-filled list that was so seriously flawed that it could have purged tens of thousands of legal U.S. citizens who are properly registered to vote from the voter rolls.